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ABSTRACT

The 10 foremost issues in American education are discussed in this document. Based on the premise that three-quarters of the effects on an institution are triggered by external forces, the focus is on external influences on education. The discussion is intended to move readers to the level of organizational discussion and debate. Twelve sections present information on the current educational system's ability to meet overwhelming demands; citizen dissatisfaction and the push for immediate, low cost solutions; the conflict between entertainment and reality in instruction; developing visionary local governance; making sacrifices and trying new strategies to compete internationally; identifying common denominators among interest groups; meeting international educational standards; obstacles to change; recognizing and stopping violence in the schools; and appreciating the positive aspects of the situation. (LMI)

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The Top Ten Educational Issues

1991 Edition

The Institute for Future Studies

EA 022 594

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Our focus is change.
Our business is creating strategic advantage.
Our goal is preferred tomorrows.

At The Institute for Future Studies at Macomb Community College...
We believe we can help people and organizations change the boundaries of their ideas.
We believe we can help people develop perspectives that are broader and deeper.
And we believe there are endless options for building better tomorrows.

All this is possible—we believe—because of a uniquely human quality called thinking.

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The Top Ten Educational Issues (1991)
is part of the **Strategic Advantage Series**
published by The Institute for Future Studies at Macomb Community College,
Dr. William J. Banach, Executive Director.

Designed to stimulate thinking and encourage reasoned initiatives,
the **Strategic Advantage Series** addresses significant societal issues.

The Top Ten Educational Issues

Foreword

This is the twelfth edition of *The Top Ten Educational Issues*. Like its predecessors, it is designed to stimulate dialogue and help people think about the important societal issues facing education.

Tracking trends, identifying issues and helping people become proactive is a lonely assignment. As I've indicated before, most educators — like most Americans — tend to be reactive. Their focus is now, and they work to handle the crisis of the moment. Often they are so consumed by the urgent that they have little time for the important.

Yet, there is a flip side to the loneliness of the assignment. It comes from the quality discussions and higher agenda expressed by those *who are* proactive thinkers. In the beginning, my issues program was nurtured into existence by such people. It was supported by Michigan's State Superintendent of Public Instruction and the Michigan State Board of Education. Now my work related to issues is possible because of the forward thinking and logistical support provided by the people of Macomb Community College. They make my work much better than it could ever be without them.

And so it seems fitting that I use my colleagues' thinking as an introduction to the 1991 Edition of *The Top Ten Educational Issues*.

To set an agenda which will move our institutions forward, we must attend to the continuum displayed below.

Trends in organizational/environmental circumstances and conditions

⇩

Shifts in human attitudes, opinions, wants and needs

⇩

Unresolved issues or dilemmas

⇩

Topics for organizational discussion and debate

⇩

Goals, strategies, tactics and plans

⇩

Organizational action

⇩

Evaluation

Institutional leaders must attend first to internal (organizational) and external (environmental) circumstances and conditions. Trends in these areas shape everything which follows.

There is, however, an uneven balance: Roughly three-quarters of what impacts an institution is triggered by external forces. That is why looking outside the organiza-

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tion is often more important than focusing on internal change. While it's important to have internal efficiencies, they'll have limited use if the organization doesn't exhibit marketplace effectiveness.

These trends in circumstances and conditions lead to shifts in human thought, and the resulting attitudes, opinions, wants and needs frequently produce unresolved issues or dilemmas. These are the topics which organizational leaders should place on the agenda for discussion and debate.

Processing issues and dilemmas produces the currency in thinking which allows development of anticipatory goals and strategies. Goals and strategies, in turn, shape organizational action and lead to strategic organizational advantage.

The Top Ten Educational Issues document is intended to move readers to level four on the continuum — at least for the moment. It presents ten significant societal issues facing education. They are the result of trends in circumstances and conditions which have produced shifts in human attitudes, opinions, wants and needs.

Put them on your organizational agenda for discussion and debate. Use them to help people change the boundaries of their ideas . . . to develop perspectives that are broader and deeper . . . to develop options for building better tomorrows.

Then get proactive. Develop an organizational action plan which puts you ahead of the curve. Discover the exhilaration lonely people experience when they find new friends at the edge.

William J. Banach, Executive Director
The Institute for Future Studies

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Collapse

It probably won't . . . but don't count on it. Driven by the legal system, the legislative process and sundry state and national mandates, public education is teetering at the edge.

In an effort to accommodate the multiple needs of diverse constituencies, public education has adopted an overwhelming agenda — one which has led to dilution of purpose and distortion of focus.

We either have the wrong goals or we aren't committed to them.

Our schools are being asked to do too much for too many. And, as they stumble under the weight of their burden, some have come to resemble the punch-drunk fighter staggering about the ring, too stunned to fall down.

"Education is the answer!" is society's response to every opportunity and the solution for every social ill. As the nature of change shifts direction and accelerates, expect the demands to increase.

Already our schools help parents by assuming roles which range from baby-sitting to the teaching of manners, morals and ethics. To help business, schools provide programs designed to enhance the quality of the workforce. To help politicians, they produce an educational batting average by testing progress on minimal objectives. And, to help nonparents and almost everyone else, they try to function on shoestring budgets.

The assignment facing the educational enterprise is complicated by unclear expectations, funding inequities and heterogeneous constituencies. And, interrelationships between these factors are having a multiplier effect which has the system reeling against the ropes.

The reward for addressing these multiple demands and varied agendas is increased criticism and more pressure for change. This is exemplified by America's six national goals for education. They were adopted following an educational summit. Now they are being monitored by a committee which operates under the sanction of our nation's governors.

Seventy-four percent of the country's top educators think it is "very" or "somewhat" unlikely the nation can attain its educational goals during this decade. We either have the wrong goals or we aren't committed to them.

The people who make up American society *are* right — education *is* the answer. More and better schooling will enable us to seize opportunities, to cure social ills, and to build better tomorrows. Business will not get better, workers will not get smarter,

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information will not get processed, and organizations will not improve without education.

And so the question which needs an answer is this: Can our public schools effectively deliver on their promise by being all things to all people? To twist a cliche, expecting too much from a good thing may not be a good thing.

The Ugly Electorate

There's been a decline in those who perceive themselves to have a vested interest in public education. Support for schools has declined at a corresponding rate. Yet, the demographic transition from parent to nonparent status is not enough to explain the negative mood of the electorate.

Stunned by the information society, confused by new challenges, and fed up with bumbling bureaucrats, increasing numbers of citizens are striking out at their local schools. It doesn't matter that the schools themselves have done little to engender such wrath.

Quick fix, low cost, simplistic solutions do not produce a world-class educational system.

For most people accommodating change has not been easy. In fact, many have found change downright discomforting.

The effect has been amplified by unexpected vibrations from established institutions. Uncertainty abounds as our organizational infrastructure is shaken by the shift from muscular to mental pursuits. There is little comfort in discovering that our rock-solid financial institutions may be built on shifting sands. And, the clumsiness of the political process does little to nurture a sense of security. Confidence in traditionally stable institutions is on a roller coaster ride.

People are seeking structure and hungering for focus. They are reaching for the comfort and stability of familiar times.

Yet, there is a paradox in this quest. Simple solutions from the past do not accommodate complex problems of the present. And, important issues of the future can't be addressed without understanding a new mosaic of interrelationships

Citizens are acting on their frustrations by recalling policy-makers and generating unprecedented numbers of ballot initiatives. But the recalls and initiatives tinker with the parts without regard for the whole. Citizen initatives and recall thinking are not the answers. People like Washington, Jefferson and Franklin warned us about that a long time ago.

Yet, government by plebiscite is the direction in which we are headed. Fed up with the way things are working, people are taking matters into their own hands. They are pursuing a better society while simultaneously restricting the funding and authority available to those charged with running things.

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But better schools are not the result of restricted options. Quick fix, low cost, simplistic solutions do not produce a world-class educational system. The security of the past is not a solution for the challenges of the future. Better schools result from the relentless pursuit of shared visions.

Bad things happen when good people get angry. We can expect little more than an ugly society from an ugly electorate. Somehow we must lift the agenda and climb higher. Long-range answers don't come from short-range thinking.

Entertainment

Our children lead a different life. They can't see the monsters in the clouds. They've missed visualizing a story told well. And they find little excitement in the beauty of an autumn leaf.

Instead, they toddle about dulled by passive pleasures. They have started their journey through life being entertained.

By the time they come to kindergarten our children find little excitement in blocks and books. For many, television is their best friend.

Entertainment cleans away mental cobwebs and leaves you happy, but it's always followed by reality.

As the school years pass they become frustrated by challenges which can't be solved in thirty-minute time blocks.

And, they're overwhelmed when there isn't a technological resolution for every problem.

At the high school level things get worse. Living a life characterized more by television than textbooks, many come to class, fold their arms and challenge teachers to entertain them. Surveys indicate what they like best about school are their friends and social pursuits.

This is not the right stuff for addressing national goals which challenge us to lower the dropout rate, to be first in the world in math and science, to make every adult a literate worker and citizen.

While good education is more fun than work, *it is* work. Quality schooling takes discipline, sacrifice and commitment over time. That's something students, parents, politicians and business leaders must appreciate. Perhaps we need a video game to teach the lesson.

Indeed, educators might take a lesson from entertainers and package learning in segments which have a beginning, middle and end. Maybe great graphics, upbeat music and a little sex would sell learners on the value of education. Perhaps Roger Rabbit could even explain the relationship between calculus and real life.

Entertainment is one of life's rewards. When it becomes a way of life, it is one of life's handicaps.

Entertainment cleans away mental cobwebs and leaves you happy, but it's always followed by reality. Quality education is the same . . . except that it allows you to deal with the reality.

Author Warren Bennis says we are on a collision course with reality. If the focus of our life is entertainment, it may be time to check the air bags.

Proper Perspectives

A big committee is mustering to run public education. It's composed of business people, lay citizens and legislators. Anyone else who wants to join will probably be welcome.

Left unfocused, this "committee" will accumulate power in excess of anyone's intent. It may also make a mockery of the accountability it seeks.

Some educators have already abdicated responsibility and given the "committee" authority over the people, programs and priorities which are essential to learning. Others foresee the "committee" as an insurmountable obstacle and are simply deserting the profession.

Without the proper perspectives, the loudest voices can change curricula which have taken years to develop . . .

How is it that a committee might determine educational direction and the methods by which we instruct our students? One answer resides in our governance structure.

Local school boards may be the last political body which people can approach directly to get a hearing and a decision. It is both the blessing and curse of local control that citizen representatives are so easily accessible. Sometimes three people appearing before a board look like a ground swell, and that is why those who approach boards often get their way.

As education restructures and reforms, school trustees will need a process for change. They will have to take broader soundings. And, they will have to seek public advice and counsel while helping people understand that a committee composed of everyone cannot be allowed to run things.

Committees don't work under certain conditions. Educational institutions don't either. For example, when everyone is in charge, no one is in charge. And when purpose is unclear and people don't have to live with the consequences of their decisions, there's a nil prognosis for progress.

Proper perspectives are the building blocks of better tomorrows. They result from:

- knowing where the institution is headed;
- having a process for getting where you want to go;
- understanding the issues;
- having adequate decision-making information; and,
- appreciating that collective purpose is more important than individual anything.

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Without the proper perspectives, the loudest voices can change curricula which have taken years to develop . . . and they can dictate new programs without regard to educational methodology or process.

As the committee expands through the creation of community councils (aka building-level school boards) and site-based employee teams, there is potential for adding new layers of politics, turf protection and special interest. Without the proper perspectives these movements can produce murky standards and inhibit the development of clearly defined educational outcomes. If that happens, educational purpose will be diminished and we will do a disservice to our students.

Vision is the antidote for leadership by committee. It lets everyone know where the train is headed.

Process is the cure. It makes the journey toward tomorrow both promising and possible.

Committees can embrace a vision and nurture a process for change, but they can't deliver either one.

When it comes time to do something, look for qualified people with the proper perspectives.

Foreign Competition

Public schools teach about competition, but they are just now learning the subject. Not long ago, in fact, public school educators completely dismissed any notion of competition. Then parochial and private schools emerged as competing voices. They were followed by the home school movement and privately franchised learning centers. Now parental choice is on the political continuum in most of our states.

Public school educators may not learn fast, but they do learn. Today they understand that the competition is real. They are even beginning to appreciate the need for year-round communication/marketing programs. And they are beginning to realize that, while tests and objectives may be flawed, test results and student outcomes *do* matter in the marketplace.

When people can't keep up by running faster, they try new strategies.

But now there's a new player in the competitive arena: foreign competition.

This year a major international corporation proposed building and operating a "German-style vocational-technical school" in the U.S. Within weeks of the announcement, representatives from thirty-seven states had called to express interest in the corporation's plans.

Think about it. If you had the option of choice and your child had vocational leanings, would you send your youngster to a private vocational school, a public vocational school, or the "German-style vocational-technical school"?

Suppose the Japanese opened a school in the middle of your community. How many people, given the choice, would give it a try?

Today foreign competition is as foreign to educators as it was to the U.S. auto industry fifteen years ago.

"Buy American" billboards didn't work for many of our nation's industries. They may not work for public schools either. Bumper stickers that said "Buy a foreign car and put 10 Americans out of work" didn't garner support for the auto workers; they may not do the job for teachers either.

In America, there is a penchant for the new. No one is sure the educational agenda advanced by business or the Germans or the Japanese will work . . . but *it is* new and many will be willing to try it.

This is a period of radical change. When people can't keep up by running faster, they try new strategies. Foreign schools may be one of the new strategies for the future.

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The ace in the hole for American education is that foreign schools often require students *and* parents to work harder and longer. Foreign competitors may gain a foothold as soon as parents are willing to make the sacrifices which will help their children learn. Ironically, the same hard work and dedication is all that's required to revitalize the American educational system and make it once again the standard against which all others are judged.

Natural Enemies

Doctors don't like it when you tell them their business. Lawyers get upset when you question their advice. In fact, most professionals — maybe all people — don't like others trampling on their turf.

That's why parents and educators may be natural enemies. Consider this: A parent-teacher conference begins with the teacher saying Stuart doesn't read too well. Mother and father believe their parenting skills are being questioned. Teacher is trampling on parental turf.

They respond by saying: "If you'd just teach phonics, everything would be okay!" Now the parents are stepping on teacher turf — questioning the professional's ability.

Once the common ground is identified, it'll be harder to step on someone else's turf.

Educators keep saying they want parents and others "meaningfully" involved in the schools, but no one has defined the dimension of such a goal. Perhaps that's why there's a forked-tongue mental set about parental involvement. "Come close," school people say. But they're thinking: "Not that close, for heaven's sake!!!"

In one school district mothers who try to help out are called "Helicopter Moms" by the staff because ". . . they're always hovering around."

If parental involvement in the educational process is one of the common denominators for student success (and most people believe it is!), then we must work to break down the barriers between educators and the people they serve.

If learning is a family affair, then there must be an environment of openness, sharing and team play.

Both sides need training. Both sides must identify the desired student outcomes and define what kinds of meaningful involvement will make them possible. What, for example, should our graduates be able to do? What, for example, is meaningful involvement to a dual-career couple? Is it the same for a single parent? When the outcomes are unclear and society's family tree is replaced by a hedge, teacher-parent relations can't be the same as they were for the Cleavers.

Our colleges of education could help by giving teacher candidates the demographic context for schooling and information about the operant values of a changing constituency. Staff development specialists could provide training to help educators understand the dynamics of a learning partnership and define the dimensions of meaningful involvement.

Once the common ground is identified, it'll be harder to step on someone else's turf.

World-Class Standards

Most students in my area do quite well on the state assessment tests. In fact, last time around many got *all* the questions right! Those youngsters were given certificates at a school board meeting and mentioned in the district's newsletter.

My state's assessment program is like others in that it measures progress toward minimal objectives. Students are considered a success when they attain 75 percent of the objectives. When that happens we say we have excellence in education.

We need to identify the league we want to play in and get busy meeting the standards.

The community assumes that if we have this many kids doing so well on state tests, we must have a pretty good school system. In fact some local voters think our schools are so good there must not be any need for the additional financial support they sometimes request.

The children in our schools are not competing against one another, say the test people. They're competing against the test. That's why minimal objectives even create happiness among those who don't like to talk about competition and children in the same sentence. After all, minimal objectives make everyone a winner. Every child can feel gifted for a day. Scoring big is great for your self-esteem!

But doing enough to get by should not be cause for celebration. New standards are emerging. It isn't good enough to be good enough anymore.

There is new competition — real competition. The youngsters in our classrooms are not competing against a test of minimal objectives or even one another. They are going to be measured against their counterparts in Taiwan, South Korea and Germany. Ultimately, what is happening in schools there and in my little community will converge. The main event will be played in the global village. The game will be hardball.

New world-class standards will define winners and losers during this decade. They will redefine the nature of education, and determine the quality of our life.

So while people in our town are all pumped up with pride over our academic prowess, many fail to note that the yardstick is minimal standards. These are the same people who would be upset if the coach asked the team to "Go out there and give it 75%!"

Excellence is not measured in minimums. If it were, everything would be excellent and every student would be an all-star.

We don't encourage workers to give us the minimum. We're not interested in how people stack up against mediocrity. And, we certainly can appreciate that the self-esteem of our youngsters will be severely impacted when they learn their education has been geared to mediocrity.

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To ignore world-class standards and emerging competition is head-in-the-sand behavior. How our youngsters measure up will determine their lot in life. If education is to be our legacy to future generations, we need to identify the league we want to play in and get busy meeting the standards.

Missing the Boat

"We're developing a plan for the school district. This year we're gearing-up. Next year we'll involve people, and by the third year we'll have the whole process finished."

This is how planning begins, and this is why there are choppy seas on the voyage to change.

Why does it take a year to "gear-up" for change? Why are people always planning to plan? How can staff and constituents motivate themselves if they have to wait three years to see whether they're headed in the right direction?

Staff members say, "We've been through this before," and wait for the process to collapse.

Yet, the scenario above describes a school district which is *ahead* of the curve. Its leadership is at least thinking about planning.

Many school districts are missing the boat because they haven't started planning. These are rudderless operations. They drift from fad to fad, and are blown about by pressure groups. Sometimes it takes a mutiny to get them on course.

Other school districts miss the boat because they drag out the planning process over years. As this happens, people lose whatever interest they may have had. Staff members say, "We've been through this before," and wait for the process to collapse. Hence, the grand plan never materializes. Finally, someone in research becomes obsessed with the task, produces reams of reports, and does more to create paralysis than progress. In these districts planning sinks out of sight — relegated to "the end of the hall on the lower level."

As if missing the boat isn't bad enough, there are also three ways to miss the dock. They account for some of the reasons people miss the boat.

1. **There is no vision.** Unless the leadership of the school district produces a vision, there is no hope of leading. People need to be told where the organization is headed. But leaders must also tell them that there is no way to see the vision without their help.

2. **There is no process.** Leaders have to have a process for change. Without it they can't develop champions for change nor can they involve people. Without process there is no hope of accommodating change in a way which can provide strategic organizational advantage. Process spells the difference between action and reaction.

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3. **There is no plan.** No vision means no process. No process means no plan — at least one for which there is ownership and support. Just as charts guide a sailor, plans guide organizations. They help leaders show people where the institution is headed. That, in turn, allows leaders to communicate . . . with the staff, with school supporters, and — perhaps most importantly — with the larger constituency which ultimately decides whether the institution's vision is worth pursuing.

Sailing the seas of change is simultaneously challenging and exhilarating. It is the only way to get to new destinations. Unfortunately, many are missing the boat because they can't find the dock.

Violence in America

Well-dressed children on the east coast went back to school this year wearing bullet-proof vests.

On the west coast a school district has spent almost $200,000 constructing a plexiglass shield around the playground. It's designed to protect students from gunfire in the neighborhood.

And, all over America the nightly news is rarely without stories of drug-related violence and its impact on children.

Violence is a societal problem which spills over into our schools and affects our children.

The superintendent of a leading educational agency had a "What have we come to?"-look on his face as he remarked in frustration that his instructional staff included eight drug abuse consultants, four consultants to help deal with gangs . . . and no consultants for early childhood education.

During the last four years, 70 people have been shot to death in our schools. An additional 200 have been seriously wounded. A survey by the Community Mental Health Council of Chicago found that 35 percent of middle- and high-school students had witnessed a stabbing, and 39 percent had seen a shooting. Nearly one-quarter of more than 1,000 inner-city students said they had seen someone killed, and nearly half said they themselves had been the victim of a violent act.

The fact that we have drug-related crime, drive-by shootings and gangs is not an educational problem. It is a societal problem which spills over into our schools and affects our children.

There are signs that we are becoming a society in which reasoned dialogue, discussion and debate are being replaced by shouting and shooting. Unable to make their point or advocate their position with words, too many are turning to personal destruction.

The issue begs community discussion and a dogged determination to stop this nonsense. You can't learn if you're afraid.

Don't Worry

At the end of the decade singer Bobby McFerrin soothed Americans with a song titled, "Don't Worry, Be Happy." The recording encouraged listeners not to be overcome by the circumstances of their situation. Character Bart Simpson puts it differently: "Don't have a cow, man!"

And so a song and a comic character provide vehicles for procrastination as we continue on our collision course with reality.

Politicians say no new taxes. "Read my lips" replaces "Where's the beef?" Cliches mask what needs to be done.

It's easy not to worry if all you're concerned about is yourself.

Across our country people wiggle into office by promising no new taxes . . . or to reduce taxes . . . or "to fight" for an end to taxes. Don't worry. We can have better roads, bridges and highways without taxes. Be happy!

Don't worry. We can take care of the homeless, provide medicare coverage for the elderly, and have every child start school ready to learn without taxes. Be happy!

In fact, there all kinds of things to be happy about:

- Financial support for education is becoming increasingly local as the arena in which our graduates will function is becoming increasingly global.
- Identifying educational direction and maintaining the stability of the enterprise is becoming more difficult as the constituencies of schools become more numerous and diverse.
- The continuing professional development of educators is characterized by insufficient thought, time, commitment and funding.
- Most schools do not have a vision, mission and goals which will guide them toward the future.
- Clocks, calendars and contracts, coupled with adversarial processes and "me first-attitudes" inhibit creative approaches in our schools.
- The educational bureaucracy often emulates the glacial slowness and clumsiness of the political process.

It's easy not to worry if all you're concerned about is yourself. It's easy to be comfortable when you have a new five-year contract. It's easy to think that we can

— Over —

overcome adversity and succeed again with some old fashioned vision, commitment, sacrifice and money. It's easy to chant: "Rain, rain, go away. Come again another day."

Thinking people find life exhilarating because they see the new opportunities, challenges and standards on the horizon. They are worried because they don't see the vision, commitment, sacrifice and financial support to get the job done.

It is important not to be immobilized by the circumstances and conditions facing us. Perhaps the first thing we should do *is* lighten up and laugh. Levity permits mental regrouping and the development of new perspectives. It helps people move on to the next opportunity. Singapore's Minister of State for Finance and Foreign Affairs urged citizens of his country-state to do exactly that when he said: "We have to pursue this subject of fun very seriously if we want to stay competitive in the 21st Century." So, be happy. Then worry.

Other related publications of The Institute for Future Studies at Macomb Community College

- *The Top Ten Issues Facing America's Colleges (1990 Edition)*
- *The Top Ten Issues Facing America's Colleges (1991 Edition)*
- *The Top Ten Educational Issues (1990 Edition)*
- *The Preparation Gap*
- *The Two Year Institution: Serving Society's Needs*
- *Are You Too Busy To Think?*

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